

What Every Catholic Needs to Know about Catholic Marriage

The real vocations crisis in the United States, some Catholic Church insiders like to point out, is not the diminishing number of priests. It is the dramatic decrease in the number of Catholic marriages.

Compared with 35 years ago, there are about 20 million more Catholics in this country – but fewer than half the number of Catholic marriages every year (see graph, Page 10). Put another way, while the number of Catholics has grown 41 percent, the number of Catholic marriages has plummeted 53 percent. For comparison's sake, in that same time period the number of priests has dropped “only” 27 percent.

This trend in the Church mirrors what's going on in broader society: More people are getting married later, or are forgoing marriage altogether. On at least one point, though, Catholics are somewhat countercultural: They are substantially less likely than Protestants to get divorced (25 percent versus 39 percent).

The reasons for marriage's decline could be many: the aftereffects of the sexual revolution, contraception's separation of sex from procreation, a widespread aversion to lifelong commitment, materialism, or any of a host of other possible causes.

What is clear, though, is that without a strengthening of the institution of marriage, both society and the Church will wither. As the foundation of the family, marriage is the foundation of society (and in some ways of the Church, too).

Broken Catholic marriages are also a No. 1 reason why people leave the Church, usually because of a misunderstanding of what the Church actually teaches.

Addressing the issue in the Church will require a lot more than marriage preparation classes, no matter how comprehensive and rigorous they are.

Supporting marriages must be a parish- and community-wide effort, by reaching out to troubled couples, mentoring newlyweds or those planning marriage, and making one's own home a model of Christian family love. May these pages serve as inspiration.

What it means in practice

Being partners in Christian identity means that when your spouse asks for more from you, you are obliged to give it, not necessarily because your spouse deserves such generosity, but because you have a responsibility to God to demonstrate that generosity.

Whenever you hold back in your married life, you prevent God from loving your mate the way he wants to love him – the way your mate needs to be loved. Remember, God requires you to be Christ to your spouse. When was the last time Christ refused you a sign of affection? When did he ever refuse to share the comfort of his precious body with you? You may not have deserved it, and God may or may not have felt like doing it, but, oddly these issues never came up.

For a Christian, being a master of marital skills has little to do with being a good earthbound companion and everything to do with being a collaborator in God's plan of salvation for you and your mate. If your spouse isn't even worth a couple of flowers, a card, some good conversation, or some physical affection from you, how will your mate ever learn to accept the immense bounty of love that God has prepared for her in his heavenly kingdom?

Helping your mate get to heaven involves a great deal more than getting to church on Sunday and praying your Rosary. It

involves all that – plus being the loving, attentive, generous spouse Christ would be if he were married to your partner. Have you ever really appreciated the importance of your role as a husband or wife in God’s plan? Grasping this importance is the essential first step of answering the call of the Church, “Families, become what you are.”

– From “For Better ... Forever! A Catholic Guide to Lifelong Marriage” (OSV, \$14.95), by Gregory K. Popcak

Grounds for annulment

Every wedding doesn’t make a marriage, at least as understood by the Church. In an annulment, formally known as a declaration of invalidity, a Church tribunal, after careful examination of a couple’s history, determines that a marriage never existed between them.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, an annulment decree does not cost a lot of money, and it does not mean that any children produced by the union are illegitimate. For Catholics who have divorced (and perhaps remarried), the annulment process – which starts with a visit to a parish priest – is an important way to regularize their status with the Church and can even be therapeutic in putting the broken relationship behind.

The United States leads the world in the number of annulments sought and granted.

A marriage can be declared invalid for several reasons related to the ability of one or both of the partners to understand and agree to the Catholic understanding of marriage before the wedding ceremony. Below are some common reasons.

- The existence of an impediment, such as a previous marriage or religious vows or a close blood relationship between the couple (a brother and sister or first cousins). Some of these can be dispensed.

- Psychological incapacity, at the time of the wedding, to assume the duties of marriage; for example, if one of the parties suffers from a serious mental illness that prevents him or her from taking up parental or spousal duties.
- The presence, at the time of the wedding, of an intention contrary to marriage or something essential to marriage; for example, one of the spouses refuses to have children, does not intend to remain faithful to the other spouse or believes in the possibility of divorce.
- The presence of a future “condition” for marriage, such as one spouse demanding that the other spouse will achieve a certain level of income.
- Psychological immaturity that did not allow one or both parties to understand the true nature of marriage at the time of the wedding. An example would be a teenage couple who hardly knows each another, but who decide to marry because the girl is pregnant. They have not thought about how they will support each another in marriage, nor do they know each other well enough to make a lifelong commitment.

Same-sex marriage

Public demands for same-sex “marriage” are growing louder and more insistent. Although until now voters across the country have rejected every ballot initiative to give same-sex couples the legal opportunity to “marry,” some state legislations have pushed it through.

The Church, which opposes such moves, will be an increasingly lonely voice on this issue. And it will be painted as heartless and hopelessly out of date.

So why does the Church teach that marriage can only be between one man and one woman?

Essentially, because biology and Scripture both point to a fundamental reality: Men and women are different (including sexually), but are made for one another. Their complementarity draws them together in a union that ideally is an expression of love, and that also carries the potential for procreation.

These truths about marriage are present in the natural order itself. Governments, therefore, are not free to define marriage any way they please. (Ignoring the natural order when issuing laws leads inevitably to social disorder and ills.)

Marriage is a private relationship with public consequences, as the foundation for the family and society itself. It provides the best environment for rearing children: a stable, loving relationship between mother and father. It offers society an essential pattern for male-female relationships: interdependence, and seeking the good of each other, their families and others.

To deny legal marriage status to homosexual relationships is not to deny the dignity of people with same-sex attractions. It is simply to bear witness to the truth of what marriage is. The Church insists that even as we oppose homosexual acts as gravely immoral, we must defend the dignity of homosexual persons and invite them to seek wholeness in Christ through a life of chaste love for others.

Married Models

In 2001, Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi of Rome, married in 1905 and parents of four, became the first couple to be beatified together in Church history.

Pope John Paul II called their faith and love “a living demonstration of what the Second Vatican Council said about all the faithful being called to holiness.”

Zelie Guerin and Louis Martin , the parents of St. Therese of Lisieux and eight other children, were beatified in October

2008.

“Louis and Zelig are a gift for spouses of all ages, through the esteem, respect and harmony with which they loved for 19 years. They lived the promises of marriage, the faithfulness of engagement, the indissolubility of the bond, the fruitfulness of love, in happiness and in trials, in health and in sickness,” said Cardinal José Saraiva Martins during their beatification Mass in Lisieux, France.

The sainthood cause of a third married couple, 20th-century Spaniards Paquita Dominguez and Tomas Alvira , was opened in February 2009.

Divorce A Sin?

When the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was permissible for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus said: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces and marries another, she commits adultery” (Mk 10:11-12).

Because of that, many people think that divorce itself is a sin and grounds for automatic excommunication.

In fact, divorced Catholics who have not remarried remain in good standing with the Church. The Church recognizes that sometimes divorce is necessary. “If civil divorce remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of the children, or the protection of inheritance, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2383).

But those who are divorced and remarried without an annulment are not permitted to receive Communion unless they turn to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and commit, at the least, to living “as brother and sister” with their new spouse.

They are, nevertheless, encouraged to consider themselves

Catholic, to remain in the Church, to attend Mass and to raise their children in the Faith.

Life of Service

Like the other sacraments, marriage is a sign that reveals Christ, and is also a vehicle for the communication of his divine life and love. What is unique about marriage is that it expresses the unfailing bond of love between Christ and his Church.

Catholics trace the institution of marriage to the first moment of human history. The creation stories in Genesis relate that God created Adam and Eve, a “suitable partner,” blessed them, and told them to “be fertile and multiply.”

Marriage is known as one of the sacraments of service to communion. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (No. 1601).

The striving of the spouses to grow in living a life of loving sacrifice for each other and for their children is part of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. Marriage is a school of holiness through service to the other, and is a witness to all those that the married couple and family encounter.

The Second Vatican Council called marriage a “whole manner and communion of life,” and resurrected an early Christian description of it: “domestic church.”

“The home is the first school of Christian life and ‘a school for human enrichment,’” says the Catechism. “Here one learns endurance and the joy of work, fraternal love, generous – even repeated – forgiveness, and above all divine worship in prayer

and the offering of one's life" (No. 1657).

Cohabitation

Until 1970, cohabitation was illegal throughout the United States. Today, according to the last U.S. Census Bureau report, more than 5 million unmarried men and women are living together in this country, an increase of 1,000 percent since 1960.

More than 50 percent of newly married couples today have lived together before their wedding. Fourteen percent of them had lived with a previous partner.

The Church's moral opposition to cohabitation rests in the basic teaching that sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage, and that marriage is the total giving of each spouse's physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual being without reservation. By definition, there cannot be "trial" or temporary marriage, or marriagelike arrangements.

Social science backs up the Church's stand. Couples who live together before marriage face a much higher risk of divorce – as much as 85 percent, according to some studies. In cohabitation relationships, there is greater incidence of domestic violence and abuse, depression and conflict over money. Just 4 percent of cohabiting couples stay together for 10 years.

So it is no surprise that when a cohabiting couple approaches the Church to be prepared for marriage, they are urged to live apart and abstain from sexual relations until the wedding. Living chastely helps couples understand the sacrifices involved in marriage, improves communication skills and opens them to different dimensions of their future spouse.

Birth Control

Survey after survey shows that Catholic couples in this country overwhelmingly reject the Church's teaching on contraception.

The Church's teaching can be boiled down to this: Contraception falsifies the meaning of the sex act. Sex is for bonding and having babies; if people are not ready for babies or bonding (and/or are not married), they ought not to be engaging in sexual intercourse.

Perhaps precisely because contraception is so widespread, fertility is seen increasingly as a disease to be managed, and pregnancies are spoken of as "accidental," even though the biological purpose of sex is procreation.

The health risks of chemical contraception to women are considerable; the list of bad side effects is long and includes weight gain, reduced sex drive, high blood pressure, strokes, heart attack and increased incidence of some forms of cancer.

And while contraception has been touted as liberation for women, it risks their objectification in relationships and is actually less giving, because it means withholding a key dimension of the man or the woman: fertility.

Contrary to what many Catholics think, the Church does not teach that spouses must have as many babies as physically possible. Methods of natural family planning engage the couple more closely with their bodies and fertility, allowing them to abstain from sex during fertile days.

The kinds of benefits that flow from natural family planning indicate its goodness: Spouses become more self-controlled, better communicators and more generous; they report experiencing greater love and intimacy, and they rarely divorce.

For More Information

- Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos. 1601-1666
- “Marriage: The Rock on which the Family is Built” (Ignatius, \$14.95), by William E. May
- “Annulment: 100 Questions and Answers for Catholics” (Servant, \$11.99), by Pete Vere and Jacqui Rapp
- “What the Church Teaches: Cohabitation” (OSV pamphlet), by Lorene Hanley Duquin
- “What the Church Teaches: Same-sex Marriage” (OSV pamphlet), by Paul Thigpen
- “Sex and Contraception” (OSV), by Janet Smith
- www.foryourmarriage.org
- www.exceptionalmarriages.com

Annulment statistics for 2006

(the most recent year figures are available)

Annulment cases introduced, worldwide

85,235

Annulments granted, worldwide

58,322

Annulments by continent

Africa – 537

Oceania – 996

Asia – 3,428

Europe – 10,609

North America – 36,885

South and Central America – 5,867

Source: 2007 Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae (Statistical Yearbook of the Church)

Catholic Marriage Numbers

The marital status of Catholic Americans, according to a 2007 report by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

Marriage statistics for 2006

(the most recent year figures are available)

3,002,661 – Catholic marriages worldwide

2,732,386 – Between Catholics

270,275 – Mixed marriages

34%

Married in the Church

3%

Married, not in the Church, but convalidated

16%

Married, not in the Church nor convalidated

1%

Separated

12%

Divorced

5%

Widowed

4%

Living with a partner

25%

Never married

Marriage Drop-Off

Despite the fact that there are 20 million more Catholics in the United States than there were 35 years ago, the number of Catholic weddings has dropped to less than 200,000 per year, which is about half the number performed in 1975.

68,115,001

Number of U.S. Catholics, 2009

191,265

Number of Catholic Marriages in U.S., 2009

48,465,438

Number of U.S. Catholics, 1975

406,908

Number of Catholic Marriages in U.S., 1975

Quotes

“All the wealth in the world cannot be compared with the happiness of living together happily united.”

– St. Marguerite D’Youville

“Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love.”

– Pope Benedict XVI (Deus Caritas Est)

“It is easy to love the people far away. It is not always easy

to love those close to us. It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. Bring love into your home for this is where our love for each other must start.”

– Blessed Teresa of Calcutta

“Marriage is an act of will that signifies and involves a mutual gift, which unites the spouses and binds them to their eventual souls, with whom they make up a sole family – a domestic church.”

– Pope John Paul II

This material was prepared by Our Sunday Visitor staff. Dominican Sister Janet Schaeffler, a former director of adult faith formation for the Archdiocese of Detroit, is project consultant.